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ABSTRACT

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## THE HUMANITIES TODAY

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses several of the many books and articles which have appeared during the past decade which chronicle the supposedly precarious state of the humanities in higher education. The paper focuses on the first book, the surprise bestseller, "The Closing of the American Mind," written by Allan Bloom in 1987 and especially on a new book written in 1997 by John N. Ellis, "Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities." The paper contends that in making their analyses these academic authors ignore any events which occur outside the university campus and that they also ignore the real reasons for the changing nature of humanities education in the United States. Contains 7 references. (Author)

The many books and articles about the precarious state of the humanities in higher education which have appeared in the decade since the publication of Allan Bloom's surprise best seller, "The Closing of the American Mind," are remarkably similar in their thoughts about the culprits in the sad situation. The culprits are always the same: affirmative action, feminism, multiculturalism, deconstruction, political correctness, the sixties, weak humanities deans, and so on. What is remarkable about all these books and articles is the complete lack of commentary or discussion about how the world outside the ivory tower might possibly affect the state of the humanities or the state of the entire university, for that matter. Indeed, for these conservative writers and scholars who are preoccupied with the failing humanities, what happens in the outside world apparently has no link to what happens on college campuses.

Allan Bloom's book, which is still readable 11 years after its publication, remains the best example of the type, and perhaps that is why it was so popular. Bloom had a long and interesting career as an academic and based his comments on a solid grounding in German philosophy. Those writers on education and culture who followed him were no doubt emboldened by his success to believe that they too could write a best seller on a difficult topic. Many, however, had political axes to grind and not much academic experience to begin with. Thus we had Lynn Cheney's "Telling the Truth," a pretentious title if there ever was one, and Dinesh D'Souza's "Illiberal Education," a cut-and-paste job of collected anecdotes about outrageous but isolated incidents on college campuses. A recent book by a retired academic,

John M. Ellis's "Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities," takes up where Bloom left off but without Bloom's sharp perceptions. In the last chapter of his book Ellis muses about why the humanities are "leftist" today:

How could this bizarre reversal have taken place? How could a group that would have been expected to behave in one way do exactly the opposite? Politics seems so central to this development that it is tempting to seek answers there. One such answer has become well known: the radicals of the 1960s have come of age; they have tenure, chair departments, and have moved the campuses sharply to the left. Yet this one fact, though significant, leaves much unexplained. (Ellis, p207)

Professor Ellis goes on to discuss the "fads and fashions" of various schools of literary criticism and theory, and finally pinpoints the real reason for the decline of the humanities: affirmative action. "Although all these factors are important, they are all overshadowed by another, without which race-gender-class criticism could never have achieved the commanding position that it now has: affirmative action, which provides both the content of this new intellectual fashion and the means to implement it." (Ellis, p216) Ellis's chapter ends with the following sentence: "We should remember that there has long been a splendid quasi-affirmative-action program for the underprivileged in this country, one with a long record of excellent results: it consisted of high-quality public education." (Ellis, p226) That is his contention--affirmative action already exists, so why would we need a program for affirmative action!

He might find his contention seriously challenged by a recent newspaper report. Recently the national newspapers published the results of a study which found that wealthier high school students with high SAT scores mostly went on to college, whereas poor high school students with high SAT scores mostly didn't go on to college. What this study shows is that those, like Professor Ellis, who sound the alarm about affirmative action "getting out of hand" and that it is not needed anymore do not really know what they are talking about.

A welcome corrective for this attitude might be the new study by Derek Bok and William G. Bowen that "challenges much of the conservative thinking about affirmative action." (Honan, "New York Times," A24, September 9, 1998). The study of the "records of tens of thousands of students over 20 years at the nation's elite colleges concludes that their affirmative action policies created the backbone of the black middle class and taught white classmates the value of integration." The focus on selective universities illustrates what its authors consider an often ignored fact: "The debate over race-conscious admissions is relevant to only about 25% of universities. The rest take all or nearly all people who apply." (Honan)

This surely will come as news to Professor Ellis. "Literature Lost" ends with an admonition to deans to "emerge from their intimidated state and begin once again to act as the quality control

of the academy." (Ellis, p230) The book's last paragraph sums up perfectly Professor Ellis's blissful ivory tower ignorance of the real world:

There is no doubt, however, that the road back to a functioning literature program on American college campuses will be long and hard. A whole generation of bright graduate students of literature (and therefore potential future literature professors) is looking at the present state of the field and many of the best of those students are deciding they do not see a productive life for themselves in the conditions that prevail. Too many of the most able are deciding to do something else with their lives. One of the saddest commentaries on the present state of affairs is that professors who have kept intact a sense of the power and variety of literature find it hardest to counsel them against the decision. (Ellis, p230)

What should be kept in mind is that Professor Ellis is not talking about the financial concerns of becoming an academic in the humanities, but rather the lack of aesthetic rewards an academic would find in today's humanities departments.

Allan Bloom, although he would agree with most of Ellis's positions and conclusions, was more practical in his reading of the university community. He wrote: "Now that the distractions of the sixties are over, and undergraduate education has become more important again (because the graduate departments, aside from the professional schools, are in trouble due to the lack of academic jobs), university officials have had to deal with the undeniable fact that the students who enter are uncivilized...." Bloom apparently noticed that there are very few jobs in the academy for humanities professors. Either this never occurred to Professor Ellis as one possible reason for the decline in interest in the humanities as well as for the decline in funding for the humanities, or this was not the case in his particular discipline. Required reading for graduate students interested in teaching literature is the newspaper article by Tammie Bob, "Degrees of Difficulty: Part-Time College Teachers Live the Tough Lessons of 90s-Style Economics." ("The Chicago Tribune Magazine," p10, July 12, 1998).

The article begins with a quote from a veteran of 40 years of teaching college English: "If I were a college student today, I would never, ever pursue an academic career." Denied tenure after seven years at one university, the long-time adjunct professor (now ill at age 63) taught six classes a semester at two junior colleges and made slightly more than \$21,000 a year, despite having a Ph.D. in French and English comparative literature from the University of Strasbourg in France. The article goes on to note that "With part-timers teaching more than 50% of all college classes (in some places the number exceeds 80%), according to the Modern Language Association, the odds are low that a student will come in contact with a full-time faculty member." (Bob, p11). The article goes on to quote the American Association of University Professors: "Institutions that rely

heavily on non-tenure-track faculty members to teach undergraduate students diminish academic freedom, respect for teaching, and public confidence in higher education."

Of course, colleges and universities are trying very hard to save money in every way possible--something else that Professor Ellis does not consider in his book. Small colleges are closing their doors in record numbers, and some have begun to share administrative tasks to save money. According to the "New York Times," "...today there are at least 21 [consortiums] representing more than 125 colleges and universities.... The appeal was not just to save money but also to enrich academic programs." (Honan, "New York Times," A17, August 12, 1998). A Montana consortium of four American Indian tribal colleges are too far apart to shuttle students back and forth, "so they are creating an on-line university using distance-learning techniques, with a shared curriculum and faculty exchanges." (Honan)

And that brings us to the one factor looming over higher education today--the explosion of technology uses in education. Allan Bloom's only mention of computers comes at the end of a litany of supercilious comments about new courses:

Then there are Black Studies and Women's or Gender Studies, along with Learn Another Culture. Peace Studies are on their way to a similar prevalence. All this is designed to show that the university is with it and has something in addition to its traditional specialities. The latest item is computer literacy, the full cheapness of which is evident only to those who think a bit about what literacy might mean." (Bloom, p341)

Professor Ellis is apparently oblivious to computers and technology and to the opportunities that the Internet has opened up for pursuing research and for sharing research across the country and across the globe. His worry is that the literary theory of today is so much worse than in previous eras. In his chapter titled "Is Theory to Blame?" Ellis contends that today's race-gender-class theory is "bad" theory--"what now passes for theory is a degraded and corrupt shadow of what theory should be." (Ellis, p203)

According to Ellis's analysis:

The impact of race-gender-class on college campuses has been incalculable... For example, in the past the knowledge and analysis provided by academics often exerted something of a calming influence where a divisive issue had aroused strong emotions in the general public; the debate became better informed and more objective. Yet the reverse now seems frequently to be the case. In matters of race relations, the campus generates and exports hysteria, and it is the common sense of the ordinary man and woman in the street that must provide a corrective. The college campus is the last place one would now expect to have a rational discussion of affirmative action.... Campus frenzy has to be countered by common sense

from beyond the campus. (Ellis, p217)

Professor Ellis and his colleagues, such as Allan Bloom, Lynn Cheney, William Bennett, Linda Chavez, and Christina Hoff Sommers, all feel that they are arguing for "standards" in the humanities in higher education, but they never take into consideration the tremendous changes that have occurred in recent years in every aspect of higher education--more and more students attending college, new technology-oriented ways of studying, an explosion of older students on campuses, more interest in professional training, less money to buttress the humanities, etc. And of course, there is the fact that the general public really pays very little attention to what happens on college campuses, no matter what these academics and sometime-academics believe. Despite their constant appearances on network and cable television, these conservatives are only "givers" of opinion and not "makers" of opinion. They take themselves much too seriously as analysts, they misread popular culture at every turn, and they put far too much faith in their own powers of persuasion with the general public.

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